May 7, 1961

GOOD GRIEF

THE QUESTION IS OFTEN ASKED: IS IT RIGHT FOR A CHRISTIAN PERSON TO GRIEVE? OR: HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN REACT TO THE DEATH OF SOMEONE VERY DEAR TO HIM? IT IS A QUESTION THAT HAS OCCURRED IN ~~MY~~ ONE FORM OR ANOTHER IN THE LIFE OF EVERY ONE OF US--AND WHICH SURELY WILL CONTINUE TO OCCUR. JUST WHAT IS THE PLACE OF GRIEF IN THE ATTITUDE OF A CHRISTIAN? DOES IT HAVE A PLACE?

THERE ARE EIGHT WORDS IN SCRIPTURE THAT HAVE TRADITIONALLY BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD. THEY ARE FOUND IN I THESSALONIANS 4:13 "GRIEVE NOT AS THOSE WHO HAVE NO HOPE." AS WE HAVE GROWN UP IN THE CHURCH AND AS WE THINK ABOUT OUR FAITH I'M SURE MANY OF US FEEL THAT WE HAVE BEEN TAUGHT THAT WHEN A TRULY CHRISTIAN PERSON CONFRONTS A DEATH SITUATION HE OUGHT NOT TO GRIEVE. WE HAVE ALL HEARD OR PERHAPS EVEN SPOKEN, WORDS OF ADMIRATION ABOUT THE PERSON WHO HAS LOST A LOVED ONE BUT HAS NOT SHOWN ANY VISIBLE SIGNS OF GRIEF. THIS HAS LED US TO RESPECT THE NONGRIEVER--AND TO FORCE OURSELVES TO REFRAIN FROM GRIEVING. IT IS AS IF THE EIGHT WORDS FROM THESS. HAVE BEEN REDUCED TO TWO--SO THAT ALL WE HAVE LEFT IS THE ADMONITION "GRIEVE NOT."

Relate grieving to weak faith

BUT THIS ADMONITION IN ITSELF IS CERTAINLY OUT OF CHARACTER WITH THE STORIES OF PEOPLE FOUND IN THE BIBLE. IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS BRAVE AND STRONG MEN, MEN WHO HAVE LED THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH THROUGH CENTURIES OF STRUGGLE GRIEVED, SORROWED AND SHED TEARS WHEN THERE WAS CAUSE. THE PSALMIST SAYS "MY TEARS HAVE

BEEN MY FOOD NIGHT AND DAY." / PETER, AFTER DENYING OUR LORD "WENT OUT AND WEPT." / EVERY CHILD KNOWS THE SHORTEST VERSE IN THE BIBLE-- "JESUS WEPT."

WHAT WE MUST REALIZE IS THAT GRIEF IS COMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIANITY--THAT SORROW AT THE EVENT OF DEATH IS BY NO MEANS THE SIGN OF A WEAK FAITH. THE SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE DOES NOT SAY "GRIEVE NOT"--BUT "GRIEVE / NOT AS THOSE WHO HAVE NO HOPE." / WE HAVE HOPE, BUT THAT IN NO SENSE OF THE WORDS KEEPS US FROM EXPERIENCING GRIEF.

GRIEF IS AN EMOTION THAT IS AS NORMAL TO THE HUMAN BEING AS LOVE, OR AS FEAR, OR AS ANGER. IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT AN EMOTION THAT IS UNEXPRESSED CAUSES TENSION / AND IN TURN THIS TENSION MAY REVEAL ITSELF IN HEADACHES, ALL SORTS OF PHYSICAL AILMENTS OR EVEN A TRIP TO A MENTAL HOSPITAL. / BEING AN EMOTION, IT IS SILLY AND EVEN DANGEROUS FOR US TO SUPPOSE THAT WE CAN AVOID AND REJECT ANY FEELINGS OF GRIEF AT THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE.

JESUS WEPT, PETER WEPT, THE PSALMIST WEPT. / WHEN WE SAY "GRIEVE NOT" WE IMPLY THAT WE ARE TO BE STOICS LIKE THE GREEKS OF OLD. BUT WE ARE NOT STOICS, WE ARE CHRISTIANS AND IN OUR SCRIPTURES WE SEE GRIEF AS NORMAL AND EVEN POTENTIALLY CREATIVE. / OUR FAITH SEES GRIEF AS A REFINING PROCESS, A PROCESS THAT CAN MAKE A PERSON DEEPER, STRONGER AND BETTER ABLE TO HELP OTHERS WHO ARE GRIEVING. WE KNOW

THAT OUR REDEEMER LIVES, THAT GOD LOVES AND CARES FOR US--THIS MAKES GRIEF BEARABLE, BUT AND IT IS A BIG BUT, IT DOES NOT ELIMINATE GRIEF.

IT HAS BEEN OBSERVED BY PSYCHOLOGISTS AND MINISTERS THAT THE EMOTION OF GRIEF OPERATES LIKE A PROCESS--WITH DIFFERENT STAGES. TO BE COMPLETED ALL THE STAGES MUST BE FULFILLED. BUT LIKE ANY OTHER EMOTION, GRIEF IS A GOOD THING ONLY UP TO A POINT. IF IT BECOMES STALLED AT ANY ONE STAGE OF THE PROCESS THE RESULTS MAY BE HARMFUL. SO WE HAVE BAD OR HARMFUL GRIEF--AND GOOD GRIEF, GRIEF THAT IS BOTH HEALTHY AND CHRISTIAN. BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT WE, EACH ONE, WILL FACE A GRIEF SITUATION, I THINK IT IS HELPFUL TO LOOK AT THIS GOOD GRIEF STEP BY STEP, AS IT IS A PART OF OUR FAITH.

THE FIRST STAGE IS SHOCK. GOD HAS MADE US SO THAT WE CAN TAKE PAIN AND SORROW AND EVEN TRAGEDY AND SOMEHOW WE ARE ABLE TO BEAR IT. WHEN THE SORROW IS OVERWHELMING OUR SENSES ARE DULLED, WE ARE NUMB,-IN RESPPNSE TO THE TRAGIC EXPERIENCE, IT IS THIS ANESTHESIA, OR SHOCK STAGE, THAT ALLOWS US TO GET OVER THE HUMP, TO GATHER OURSELVES TOGETHER WITHOUT HAVING TO FACE THE PROBLEM ALL AT ONCE. THE SHOCK STAGE MAY LAST FROM A FEW MINUTES TO A FEW HOURS TO A FEW DAYS, THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR IN THIS SHOCK STAGE BUT IF IT PERSISTS THERE IS TROUBLE BREWING.

THE TEMPORARY ANESTHESIA OF SHOCK READIES US FOR THE SECOND STAGE WHICH IS EMOTIONAL RELEASE.

THIS IS THE TIME WHEN IT DAWNS ON US HOW TERRIBLE THE LOSS IS. AND THEN ~~XXXXXXXXX~~ THE FLOODGATES ARE OPEN AND WE BECOME ALMOST UNCONTROLLABLE IN THE EXPRESSION OF OUR GRIEF. BUT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN TEAR GLANDS TO USE-AND WE SHOULD USE THEM WHEN THERE IS REASON.

AT THIS POINT OUR SOCIETY HAS MADE A GRAVE ERROR/ WE HAVE ATTACHED SOME NEGATIVE STIGMA TO MEN SHOWING GRIEF IN THE NATURAL WAY OF CRYING./ AS LITTLE BOYS, WHEN WE SKINNED OUR KNEES, WE WERE PICKED UP AND TOLD AH, AH, NOW, BOYS DON'T CRY/ AND WHEN WE WERE 10 AND FELL OFF OUR BIKE WE DID NOT DARE CRY, NOR AT 18 or at 28. AND AT 68 WHEN OUR WIFE DIES WE CANNOT CRY. A TYPICAL MAN THINKS THAT CRYING IS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS AND HE IS SURE THAT IF HE LETS HIMSELF GO IT WILL BE THE END OF HIM. /BUT THIS IS NOT TRUE./ IT IS THE PERSON THAT HOLDS IT ALL IN THAT IS IN FOR TROUBLE. BY BEING STAUNCH AND BRAVE WE ARE ONLY TURNING THAT EMOTION INWARD WHERE IT CAN CHURN AND BOIL UNTIL IT FINDS AN ESCAPE./SCRIPTURE WILL BEAR US OUT, THAT WHEN GREAT CALAMITIES CAME TO MEN OF FAITH THEY CRIED./ TO THE LADIES, I DON'T THINK YOU NEED ENCOURAGEMENT,/BUT PERHAPS A "LETS NOT OVERDO A GOOD THING.

THE THIRD STAGE IS A FEELING OF UTTER DESPAIR AND ISOLATION./ IT IS AS IF GOD IS NO LONGER IN HIS HEAVEN,/AS IF GOD DOES NOT CARE. AND IT'S DURING THIS TIME THAT WE ARE SURE THAT NO ONE HAS EVER BEEN HIT SO HARD AS WE HAVE BEEN HIT. BUT EVEN IN THE VERY DEPTHS OF DEPAIR WE MUST NOT FORGET THAT EVEN THIS IS NORMAL, EVEN THIS IS A PART OF GOOD GRIEF. MANY PEOPLE BEFORE US HAVE FELT THE SAME TERRIBLE ISOLATION AND HAVE ASKED THE SAME QUESTION/"WHY ART THOU CAST DOWN, O MY SOUL? I SAY TO GOD MY ROCK, WHY HAST THOU FORGOTTEN ME?"/ DEEP INSIDE WE ARE SAYING "WHERE IS MY GOD"/AND FROM THE CROSS OUR LORD CRIED OUT "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

THE FOURTH STEP IS A STAGE OF PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF DISTRESS. MANY A HOSPITAL CASE HAS BEEN THE RESULT OF GRIEF THAT REACHED THIS STAGE AND STOPPED THERE. A PERSON WHO HAS JUST EXPERIENCED THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE SURELY WILL LOSE HIS APPETITE OR EVEN WORSE, AND THIS IS NORMAL./ BUT IF GRIEF BECOMES BOGGED DOWN AT THIS STAGE HE WILL STAY ILL.

AS AN ILLUSTRATION LET ME USE A CASE THAT OCCURS DAILY IN THE SUBURBS AROUND CHICAGO./ IT INVOLVES A GRIEF SITUATION,-BUT ONE THAT IS NOT EVEN AS PROFOUND AS THAT CONCERNED WITH DEATH.

MR. AND MRS. A. ARE A YOUNG COUPLE IN THEIR THIRTIES WHO LIVE IN A SMALL TOWN IN IND. OR ILL. THEY HAVE A LOVELY LITTLE HOME, HE LIKES HIS JOB AND THEIR LIFE IS VERY HAPPY. HE DOESN'T MAKE TOO MUCH MONEY BUT HE COMES HOME EVERY NOON FOR LUNCH, THEY PUTTER IN THE GARDEN TOGETHER AND HE'S HOME EACH DAY AT 5:00. LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL, THEY HAVE BOTH BEEN RAISED IN THE COMMUNITY, THEIR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS ARE ALL CLOSE BY. BUT THEN ONE DAY MR. A GETS A JOB OFFER IN CHICAGO WITH A SALARY THREE TIMES WHAT HE'S MAKING IN THE LITTLE HAVEN. SO THEY MOVE TO A SUBURB OF THE BIG CITY, THEY BUY A NEW HOME, AND EVERYTHING IS JUST PERFECT. / BUT MR. A DOESN'T COME HOME TO LUNCH ANYMORE AND HIS WIFE MISSES HIM. BUSINESS KEEPS HIM IN TOWN FOR SUPPER TWICE A WEEK AND SOON HE'S ON THE ROAD. AND NOW HE'S GONE FOUR DAYS ZA WEEK. AND ALL MRS. A. HAS TO DO IS FACE THE FOUR WALLS OF HER BEAUTIFUL HOME. SHE NEVER DID MAKE NEW FRIENDS QUICKLY AND SHE'S TERRIBLY LONELY. / HER HOME BECOMES A PRISON. / SHE BEGINS TO RESENT THE NEW JOB, AND HER HUSBAND FOR ALWAYS PUTTING HIS WORK FIRST. NO LONGER IS SHE THE CENTER OF HIS LIFE AND SO SHE BEGINS TO GRIVE, MUCH AS SHE WOULD HAD HE DIED. / SHE DOESN'T TELL ANYBODY ABOUT THIS BECAUSE HER NEW LIFE IS SUPPOSED TO BE A BETTER WAY OF LIVING.

SHE IS ISOLATED, LONELY AND DEPRESSED AND SHE DEVELOPS HEADACHES, BACKACHES ALL KINDS OF ACHES. / FINALLY SHE SEES A DOCTOR AND FEELS BETTER FOR A TIME. BUT WHEN

THE SYMPTOMS RECURR SHE IS ADMITTED TO THE HOSPITAL FOR A COMPLETE CHECKUP. NOTHING IS DISCOVERED. BUT SHE IS STILL SICK, JUST AS SICK AS A PERSON WITH A BORKEN LEG OR AN ULCER.

TO PUT A HAPPY ENDING ON THE STORY LET'S SAY THAT THE CHAPLAIN BEGINS SEEING HER TOGETHER THEY TALK THIS THING OUT. SHE IS HELPED TO READJUST TO HER NEW LIFE AND THEY LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

THE POINT IS THAT PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS ARE A PART OF GRIEF. BUT IF ALLOWED TO PERSIST, THE GRIEF PROCESS WILL NEVER COMPLETE ITSELF AND THE PERSON MAY WELL DIE OF THE ILLNESS CREATED.

THE FIFTH STAGE IS WHEN WE FIND OURSELVES CONSTANTLY PREOCCUPIED WITH THE LOSS. NOW WE GET WORRIED. WE DON'T HEAR QUESTIONS THAT ARE ASKED, WE SEEM UNABLE TO REASON CLEARLY, THE LOSS IS ALL WE CAN THINK ABOUT. THIS TOO IS NORMAL AND TO BE EXPECTED IT IS WHEN WE BECOME PANICKY AND THINK WE ARE ABNORMAL THAT WE ARE THROWN DEEPER INTO DISPAIR.

THE SIXTH STAGE OF GRIEF IS A SENSE OF GUILT ABOUT THE LOSS. IF WE LOSE A LOVED ONE THROUGH DEATH ALL OF US NEED TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT SOME OF THE THINGS WE DIDN'T DO FOR THIS PERSON WHILE HE WAS ALIVE, OR PERHAPS THE THINGS WE DID DO. CONTRITE CONFESSION IS A PART OF OUR WORSHIP, WE FEEL THE NEED TO CONFESS AND WE DO. IN GRIEF WE CANNOT SIMPLY PUSH GUILT OUT OF THE PICTURE IT TOO, MUST BE DEALT WITH

REALISTICALLY.

HOSTILITY AND RESENT COME NEXT IN THE GRIEF PROCESS. THIS IS A GOOD SIGN FOR NOW WE ARE ABLE TO EXPRESS SOME OF THE STRONG FEELINGS WE HAVE BEEN HOLDING BACK. WE ARE GRADUALLY MOVING OUT OF THE DARKNESS OF DEPRESSION INTO THE LIGHT. WE SUDDENLY BECOME CRITICAL OF ANYONE AND EVERYONE RELATED TO THE LOSS. WE ARE HOSTILE TO THE DOCTOR BECAUSE HE OPERATED, OR WE'RE HOTILE TO THE DOCTOR BECAUSE HE DIDN'T OPERATE. AND NO MATTER WHAT HE HAD DONE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WRONG. IF WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO EXPRESS OUR DEEPEST FEELINGS WE MAY SAY "WHY DID GOD DO THIS TO ME." WITH THOMAS CARLYLE WE CRY "GOD SITS IN HIS HEAVEN AND DOES NOTHING."

THE EIGHTH STAGE IS INABILITY TO RETURN TO USUAL ACTIVITIES. WE TRY VERY HARD TO TAKE UP OUR DAILY ROUTINE AGAIN BUT SOMEHOW IT IS IMPOSSIBLE. SOMETHING HOLDS US BACK. THERE ARE MANY REASON FOR THIS, BUT FOREMOST AMONG THEM IS THE FACT THAT OUR AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE MAKES IT SO DIFFICULT FOR US TO CONTINUE OUR GRIEF IN FRONT OF OTHERS, THAT WE HAVE TO CARRY OUR GRIEF ALONE. MEN USED TO WEAR BLACK ARM BANDS AND WOMEN BLACK VEILS SO EVERYBODY WAS REMINDED DAILY OF THEIR LOSS. AND COULD SHARE IT. BUT SOMEHOW WE HAVE GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT GRIEF IS OUT OF THE PLACE IN CIVILIZED SOCIETY. WE FROWN ON GRIEVING AND CERTAINLY NOT

PUBLICLY. /AND SO WE OFFER OUR SYMPATHY TO OUR GRIEVING FRIENDS ONCE AND FOR ALL, WE SEND FLOWERS, AND FROM THERE ON WE SAY "LET'S GET BACK TO BUSINESS."/ WE GIVE THEM THE SILENT TREATMENT.- ABOUT THE DEATH

THIS CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE IS PERHAPS THE MOST DAMAGING OUTGROWTH OF OUR CULTURE IN THE DEATH*GRIEF SITUATION. WE MAKE A POINT OF AVOIDING ANY REFERENCE TO THE DECEASED MAN IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS WIDOW. WE GO OUT OF OUR WAY TO CHANNEL THE CONVERSATION TO A MORE "PLEASANT" TOPIC. AND ALL ALONG SHE IS CRYING OUT FOR SOMEONE, ANYONE, TO HELP HER BEAR HER BURDEN, TO SHARE HER GRIEF./ THERE IS NOTHING MORE SHE WANTS THAN TO BE REMINDED THAT YOU REMEMBER, THAT YOU CARE, THAT husband YOU ARE WILLING TO HELP HER WITH HER LOSS.

AT THIS POINT THE CHURCH HAS A RESPONSIBILITY/ "THEREFORE BEAR YE ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS." /SHOULD WE NOT RATHER TRY TO HELP,/TO TALK ABOUT THE DECEASED,/ TO LEND A HELPING HAND,-INSTEAD OF JOINING THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE IN FAVOR OF MORE PLEASANT TOPICS.

THE LAST STAGE OF GRIEF IS READJUSTMENT TO REALITY. IT IS NOT/ "WE BECOME OUR OLD SELVES AGAIN!"/ WHEN WE GO THROUGH THE GRIEF EXPERIENCE WE ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE FROM THEN ON. THINGS WILL NEVER BE QUITE THE SAME, BUT LIFE WILL GO ON. IF

WE GO THROUGH IT BELIEVING ESSENTIALLY THROUGHOUT THAT GOD IS WITH US, DISPITE THE PREVALENCE OF DISTURBING DOUBTS, WE COME OUT WITH A DIFFERENT QUALITY OF AITH THAN WE HAD BEFORE. WE ARE STRONGER, OUR THOUGHTS GO DEEPER, AND WE ARE BETTER ABLE TO HELP OUR NEIGHBOR THROUGH EXPERIENCES SIMILAR TO THE ONE THROUGH WHICH WE HAVE JUST PASSED. - The final stage occurs only after all of the others - many people stop at one stage for good shock, emot, illness, hostility, guilt - they all must be touched & passed

THE TOTAL EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF, IF THE PROCESS IS ALLOWED TO BE COMPLETED REMINDS US OF THE PSALM/"YEA THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR THOU ART WITH ME."/

THE CHURCH HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO LOOK AT GRIEF OBJECTIVELY, TO INCLUDE IT IN ITS MINISTRY TO BELIEVERS. FIRSTLY IT MUST BE OPEN, IT MUST ALLOW GRIEF TO BE EXPRESSED OPENLY AND, READILY REALIZING THAT TO REFUSE IT CAN BE HARMFUL,/ SECONDLY THE CHURCH MUST NEVER BE AKIN TO THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE TOWARDS A GRIEVING PERSON,—REMEMBERING THAT SILENCE ONLY FURTHER DARKENS THE BLACKNESS OF DESPAIR. AND LASTLY + most important THE CHURCH MUST BE READY TO SHARE GRIEF, TO HELP CARRY IT, TO TRY AS MUCH AS IS POSSIBLE TO BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS.

"IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH--THOU ART WITH ME/THY ROD AND STAFF COMFORT ME,/ AND I WILL NOT FEAR"?

AMEN.